

Prologue

Welcome to The Community:

Introducing The Great Indoors

Breathe easier. Be happier. Live better. Join us in The Community.

From the same people who brought you the life-changing Lenses by *Aura Technologies*, that seamlessly blends the digital and physical worlds with a discrete contact lens, The Community is our latest stride toward utopia.

The new self-contained development, just outside of Progress City, offers much more than housing. The Community is centered around The District, where you can shop, take college classes, or rent office space near Aura Technologies HQ. The District is encircled by the Inner and Outer Quarters. The Inner Quarters is a sprawling suburb with a playgrounds, a campsite, and a K-12 educational center. In The Outer Quarters, you'll live in towering resort-style apartments within walking distance to the largest employer, the Aura Technologies Data Center and Manufacturing Facility. Just beyond The Outer Quarters is the largest surviving marshland preserve that stretches miles to the border. The Community is the home for every lifestyle.

The Community integrates *Aura Technologies* into every aspect of life to uphold our promise of stress-free living. Every resident is gifted a pair of Lenses by *Aura* to take advantage of augmented reality features and promote connection between residents. Each home is equipped with the latest smart-home technology, including smart locks, smart thermostats, and automated grocery delivery, amongst other things. For a small fee, residents may receive an *Aura* Model 4

Electric SUV upon move-in. To ensure your safety, only *Aura* electric vehicles are approved to drive within our borders.

Aura Technologies integration does not stop within the homes. In an impressive technological feat, *Aura* microdrones surround the suburb to purify the air, transform the scenery, and add extra security. The drones remain in hexagonal positions, projecting an invisible bubble over The Community. Your safety is our number one priority.

We welcome everyone in The Community!* Bring your family or start a new one. Say hi to your neighbors and meet your best friend. Feel free enough to let your children play in the streets like your great-grandparents did. With everything you need here, there's no need to leave.

Living has never been so easy.

Aura Technologies, the tech that connects.

To schedule a tour of The Community, click [here](#).

To purchase a pair of Lenses, click [here](#).

To learn more about our mission, click [here](#).

**All Residents must agree to comply with the Terms & Conditions, which outlines our plan for repopulation. Aura Technologies reserves the right to relocate any Residents in breach of the contract.*

Chapter One

The plastic chair stuck to my sweaty thighs, even as my leg bobbed under the desk. I tried to look over my notes again, the tabs floating all around me. *The Community was founded as an escape from the climate apocalypse and deteriorating modern life. When the 2030 Mars mission failed, The Community was seen as the only viable way for humanity to survive.* I read the sentences three or four times, but the only sentence I could add to my essay was: *What if humans weren't meant to survive like this?*

I stared at the sentence. Deleted it.

Maybe, humans were meant to survive, but I wasn't.

I couldn't stop my leg from bouncing, creating this distracting rhythm from the metal bar vibrating against the wooden desk. My stomach churned at the thought of other people hearing it. I pressed my palm against my knee, consciously slowing it down. It wouldn't stop. I couldn't help myself, the nerves needed some place to go. My whole body had been clenched and buzzing, since Alina told me "we needed to talk before rehearsals".

What about? I had no proof, only theories.

The last school bell finally rang, snapping closed all of the tabs floating around my virtual workspace. Of course, my notes on the founding of The Community blink out before I have the chance to double-check that auto-save was on. If I did lose them, I can kiss my chances at an A on the history essay goodbye.

Still, I sprang out of my desk and rushed into the stream of people flowing into the hall. Everyone around me was shouting and laughing, but I was trying to shrink into nothingness. Alina was waiting for me, leaning against the charging bar right outside my classroom. The

familiar jolt of electricity passed through me when she smiled. She's in her pale blue skirt and matching headband, the light colors are a stark contrast against her black hair. With the stack of books in her arms, she looked like a character plucked out of one of those classical books she always talked about.

Alina didn't bother with hello, she simply grabbed my arm and led me through the crowd. We're both short enough to easily weave through groups and between couples. She was moving with a mission. It was like every extra second we lingered in the halls would eat away at the fifteen minutes we had to talk before rehearsals.

In three minutes, we made it into the closet under the auditorium stage. As I followed her down the winding stairs, Alina would look back up at me smiling wildly, like nothing was wrong. Tucked into the tight space together, I remembered what it felt like to breathe.

She walked me up against the rack of old, forgotten props. It rattled against my sudden weight. Alina steadied the rack, stretching her arm over my shoulder and pressing her palm against the shelf.

My heart leaped into my throat. I choked out, "What are you doing? What did we need to talk about?"

Alina's breath was hot on my face. "I've been thinking..." Her voice trailed off.

"About what?" My words sounded much harsher than Alina's soft tone.

"The dare..." She sounded like she was dreaming. Maybe, this was a dream. "Did you like it?"

I bit the corners of my lips, to hide my eagerness. I nodded, ignoring my flipping stomach and tingling skin. *This was wrong. This was so wrong.*

She closed the gap between us, our lips touching. “Can we try it again?”

I kissed her, while my brain rattled off reasons why this was a horrible idea. She was my best friend, this could get us arrested, she’s dating Brayden, and we’re in public. Though, tasting her lips seemed to quiet my mind a little.

When she pulled away for a breath of air, I felt myself smiling too hard. I could see she was too. It was the confidence I needed to hook my fingers in the belt loop of her skirt and pull her body against mine.

We melted together.

Kissing Alina set my skin on fire. I felt alive in a way I had never thought possible.

In the gaps for breath, she laughed in this playful and contagious way. It was all silly, fun and games, until her eyes got all big and her hand fit perfectly into the dip of my waist. I could tell she was about to kiss me again, the way her breath hitched and how her lips hovered above mine. But, she paused. Her other hand tucked the loose strands behind my ear. “You’re really beautiful, Mila.”

Blood rushed into my cheeks. I felt hot all over. My shaky hands traced the shapes of her face. Long straight eyebrows, slightly crooked nose, and her full lips. “I wish we could really be together.” The words came out without thinking of it. It was just a thought I had rolled over in my head over and over again for years, even before we got dared to pop kiss. I didn’t mean to say it aloud.

Alina’s lips crashed into mine, shutting me up. The overwhelming sweet sensation of her stopped my spiral in its tracks. This felt like home, like I was exactly where I was meant to be. As I got more confident, my hands dared to roam. So, my fingers wrapped around the back of

her neck and crept into her hair. Her hands were already all over me. Heat pooled in the pit of my stomach.

All I could focus on was the feeling of her on me and the sound of her breath. I didn't notice the heavy footsteps rushing down the stairs. I didn't notice the open-mouthed breathing. I didn't notice anything but Alina, until she pushed me hard into the props rack with a yelp. My head knocked into the metal edge, old telephone props tumbling from the shelf. Disoriented and halfway to a concussion, I steadied myself.

Alina's back was toward me, but the disgust in her voice was unmistakable. "Brayden, I don't know what happened here. It's not what it looks like."

Brayden stood halfway up the stairs with his hands on his hips and his chest puffed. His cheeks were red with anger, highlighting his pale blonde hair. "Whatever, Alina," he scoffed.

He didn't wait for her to say anything, just turned around and stomped up the stairs. He slammed the door behind him with unnecessary force.

Alina chased him up the stairs without acknowledging me. I listened to her sob, choking on her own breath. She was so desperate to grasp onto a life that I knew could never make her happy.

It washed over me slowly, Alina left me for someone who would never make her happy.

I sank to the floor, prayed he didn't see anything too incriminating, and convinced myself that Alina would protect me if he did. My heart rattled in my chest, making my lungs and all the other organs feel squeezed by the confinement of my rib cage.

Eventually, my *Lenses* caught a whiff of the panic and presented the breathing box. **In for four. Hold for four. Out for four. Hold for four. Repeat.**

I stayed there, breathing along with the little blue box floating in my line of vision, until I was five minutes late to rehearsals.

She never went back down there. She never made it to rehearsals. She never texted me to explain.

I was unraveling.

Dinner was brutal. I stabbed at the cubed food on my plate, chewing through the many worst-case scenarios running through my head. Each bite was tasteless. The cubed potatoes, peas, and chicken all left an over-processed aftertaste on the back of my tongue. *Is Alina ever going to text me? Was that it? I should've never kissed her back.* The lump in the back of my throat grew with each thought. *What if Brayden saw everything? Or worse, what if he told his dad?* That would be the absolute worst case scenario.

Instead of eating, I found building a wall of peas to be a much easier task. *Why would Alina pick the son of the Chief Enforcer to be her boyfriend, in the first place?* She needed a boyfriend so her mom had something to brag about at neighborhood parties, not because she actually wanted a boyfriend. Brayden was just supposed to make everyone feel like Alina had a plan for after high school. He was basically a fake boyfriend, someone she dated to get her mom off her back. She should've thought about him before she kissed me, thought about what he could do to us. Hopefully, he cares for Alina too much to hurt either of us. The routine of stabbing a singular pea with the tip of my fork and carefully sliding it down to top off a column felt nice. Finally, something felt in my control.

When Mateo kicked me in the shin, one of the columns of peas tumbled down.

I stared daggers into his head.

He only cleared his throat and glanced at Pa.

“Ohhhh.” I dragged the realization on for too long, looking from Pa to Ma to Mateo.

“Mila, what have we told you about using your *Lenses* at dinnertime?” Ma used that half-threatening tone that made her sound more like Abuela than herself.

“I wasn’t using my *Lenses*, I was just building my pea towers and, ” I smacked my lips.

“Thinking.” I settled on, simultaneously rolling my eyes and shrugging.

Ma might as well have ignored me. She continued on, “We don’t use our *Lenses* at dinner because we want you to be present, honey.” She offered a fake smile.

I rolled my eyes, again. Nobody’s listening to me. Nobody ever listens to me. I tried to breathe through the feelings crawling up my chest.

“Mila! Stop rolling your eyes at your mother. You need to apologize, right now.” Pa’s voice boomed through the space.

“I’m sorry for not being present, what were you asking me?” I cringed through the words, rattling them off under my breath.

An awkward, heavy silence weighed down the room. Until Mateo whispered, “They asked about your day at school.”

“School was fine. I’m worried I lost my notes for the history essay, but I got an A on the pop quiz today, so maybe it’ll be fine.” I wondered if I sounded to them as surprised as I felt, having found something to talk about that wasn’t my life blowing up right in front of me.

“That’s what was on your mind?” Pa didn’t bother trying to make it sound like he believed me.

“Honey, it’ll work itself out. You’ll pass with or without the notes.” Ma ignored her husband, as she often did when he began doubting our honesty.

Brayden’s face, all red, scrunched up, and twisted with anger, flashed in my mind. “Yeah, sure, it’ll all work itself out.” I shrugged.

Satisfied, Ma shifted her questioning toward Mateo. “How was your day?”

The drudgery of dinner continued on for at least another hour. With the spotlight on perfect Mateo, I slipped back down the spiral of *what if*’s. It tried to pull me into peeking at Digital Footprint to see if anyone posted, but I knew better than to use my *Lenses* at dinner. I also knew Ma would definitely notice and I’d be grounded for at least a week. So, I continued to ruminate as I stacked up the towers on my plate and nibbled on the oddly shaped bits.

Around 8PM, I managed to slip into my bedroom and venture deep into my digital world. I laid on top of my purple comforter, head propped up on a mountain of stuffed animals, in the same clothes Alina was slipping her hands under hours before.

I tapped on my temples twice. My bedroom faded away. All around me was white sand, crashing waves, and tall palm trees. I listened to the wind in the trees and the ocean rushing over the sand. I had never been to a beach or swam in the ocean, but ever since I put my *Lenses* on in elementary school I’ve been drawn to this digital landscape.

I only enjoyed the complete consumption of the landscape for a moment. Then, I got to work. Opening tabs for both Alina and Brayden’s Digital Footprint, then another one with the message thread between me and Alina.

I stared at my last message to her: *are we going to talk about what happened today?*

I sent it right after dinner, maybe two hours ago, when I had given up hope that she would text me on her own. Despite leaving me on delivered, Alina has found the time to repost memes and update her song of the week on her Digital Footprint profile. I tried not to feel crazy, but she was testing my limits. *Is she planning to never talk to me again?*

At least Brayden's socials have stayed exactly the same. There's nothing to indicate whether or not he's talked to his dad. He's posted nothing implying he has a master plan to ruin my life. Could be small wins or a sign that he's consumed arguing with Alina or confessing everything to his dad.

Sick of staring at a lack of updates, I swiped open my favorite show, *Escape The Outskirts*. It's a reality TV show set in The Outskirts, obviously. The contestants are mostly teens who are competing for their chance back into The Community after committing a crime that condemned them to exile. Then, we get to vote for who will reassimilate each week, or wins extra supplies, or has to compete with extra setbacks. It's entertaining because The Outskirts are such a brutal place, but the competitions are pretty ridiculous.

The live stream finally loads in and Heather's talking directly to the camera. Her skin is milky white, her eyes are a deep blue, and her hair is a natural dirty blonde. She's gunning for leader of the camp in this impassioned speech about her empathetic, yet ruthless leadership style. The voting menu stretches into frame from the bottom of the screen. **Heather or Jeremy.** Jeremy has been the camp lead for about two weeks and has yet to show any leadership qualities. He just flaunts his position to get newcomers into bed with him. I select Heather and watch her bar fill in with more votes.

It's kind of ironic how the camp leaders are always these pale, polite seventeen-year olds from the Inner Quarters when the majority of contestants on the show are black or brown and live in The Outer Quarters. A part of me wondered if my Inner Quarters upbringing would cancel out my brown skin on the show. *If Brayden rats, I'd find out.*

The unsettling thought lured me back to rereading old messages with Alina. Except, everything was gone. I didn't understand it. I closed out of our thread and clicked it open again. Some messages were there, but not all of them.

Someone chopped up all of our conversations. I scrolled through what was supposed to be days of texting about clothes, homework assignments, secrets; only to find a thread of messages that made me look like a stalker. Everything had been manipulated. It looked like our friendship was one-sided. All of my texts asking to hang out were met with questions about school. It made me seem like this depressing, obsessed, loser who wanted to wear Alina's skin.

What if that's true? What if that's how she saw me? Everything between us could've been fake. Doubt pulsed through my head. I could've made everything up. It didn't make any sense considering our makeout session that afternoon, but a part of me wondered if I could've imagined everything. It felt like someone was digging out my insides.

I looked back at Alina's Digital Footprint in search of some confirmation that we were friends. She kept photos of us up. Not anything that made it seem like we knew each other intimately, but pictures that told a story of our friendship.

The pictures went back years. Snapshots of us making silly faces, clips of us singing songs from boybands, and so many frames of things we did together. She kept up pictures of the mug we made in ceramics, the set we painted for the production last year, and my sheets bunched

up around us with *Escape the Outskirts* projected on the wall. It's not like these moments could be explicitly connected to me, but it was a sign she still cared.

It was a good sign. So, I let myself believe that my messages app was glitching. I reopened our chat and used the virtual keyboard to type out: *is anything wrong with your messages?* I pressed send, trying not to be bothered by the thought of having sent two unanswered questions to her.

The message floated in the chat without indicating whether or not it was delivered. I waited seconds that turned to minutes, before settling into the idea that she might've blocked me. It felt like the wind was knocked out of me. Tears didn't fall, my body didn't flinch. That couldn't be true, Mila couldn't have blocked me.

I toggled *Escape the Outskirts* to fill my Digital Workspace. I laid in bed, perfectly still, listening to Heather thank The Community for voting her into camp lead and the waves crashing on shore. I stuffed down the repeating thought: *What am I supposed to do now?*

Inside the world of my *Lenses*, everything in the real world becomes fuzzy. My senses become so overstimulated by the happenings in my head that it dulls my five senses, to the point of feeling nothing. It was the perfect way to drown Alina out.

That escape was stripped away from me, by the weight of someone's gloved hand wrapping around and squeezing my calf. I thought my bones would shatter in their hand. Whoever it was yanked me out of bed with so much force, my leg clicked out of place in my hip. I couldn't see them, but I knew it wasn't anyone in my family. I couldn't see anything real as they dragged me down the stairs. It was white-sand beaches and *Escape the Outskirts*, for as far as I could see or hear.

Pain radiated from the back of my skull having been banged against the floor over and over. I felt my face wet with hot tears, as I struggled to turn off my *Lenses*. I tapped my temples twice, in an attempt to put them to sleep, but nothing happened. So, I went about it the old-fashioned way, closing each open tab and pausing the digital landscape.

Once I shut off the reality show, I heard Mateo's cries. "What are you doing? You can't take her, you have no right!"

My stomach clenched with guilt. He shouldn't have to see me go through this. I did this to myself. I knew better.

With the digital landscape paused, the real world materialized before my eyes. Tall human forms dressed all in white surrounded me, the Enforcers. Brayden won. I couldn't tell which helmet his dad hid under, but I was already mentally preparing the speech I'd give him if we ran into each other. Each Enforcer wore bulky white helmets with a tinted glass over their eyes. Their clothes were crisp and made of a thick, plastic material. They didn't care for my long hair, breaking it off in chunks, as they dragged me down the stairs. With each step my head bobbed against the wood and my splitting headache worsened. Half of me thought, I might reach the back of my head and feel blood.

By the time we reached the front door my vision blurred in and out. I felt the cubic bits of chicken and peas threaten to make a reappearance. Nobody acknowledged the sound of my gagging. Instead, each Enforcer took hold of one of my limbs. They lifted me up in the air and walked onto the porch.

I was thrashing in their grasp, but they kept a firm grip.

I screamed, an animalistic cry. It did nothing, but draw out the neighbors.

The Enforcers trampled down the white picket fence when they broke into our home. They ran their van straight through it. My neighbors all watched through the windows or from the safety of their porch swings. Nobody moved to save me. Some smiled in delight at the scene of it all.

With only sixteen years under my belt, I knew this was what rock bottom felt like. The whole neighborhood watching me thrash and sob for my freedom, everyone knowing my efforts were pointless and gossiping about what crime I may have committed. When it was other girls or boys from my neighborhood, that's what I did, so I shouldn't expect any different.

Mateo called out after me. "Stop! Please, stop! My parents are here, talk to them."

I twisted back to see him standing on the porch between Ma and Pa. They were holding him up, as he crumpled to his knees with wild sobs. My parents, on the other hand, looked completely unfazed, as was The Community expectation. The color drained from Ma's cheeks when I made eye contact with her, but she didn't look the least bit surprised.

"Help me!" I screamed at her.

It didn't matter.

Ma and Pa already knew why I was being sent away. They always knew. We just pretended it wasn't happening, they never asked me about boys or my plans after graduation.

As I approached the van, the widest of all the Enforcers swung open the door to the backseat. He picked me up in one clean gesture, throwing me over his shoulder. I got one more look at my family. Ma and Pa waved me away with thin smiles plastered on their faces. Mateo had completely sunk to the floor, his face bright red, and his dark curls wet from crying. He would probably get in trouble from all the dramatics.

The Enforcer threw me into the back of the van directly on my back. My vision blurred again, pain trickling up and down my spine. I laid flat, staring up at the carpeted texture of the roof.

The engine roared to life, then the car began driving itself.

The Enforcers did not make any small talk. They did not listen to any music. They sat in silence, with the low hum of an electric car filling the air.

I tried to keep my crying down. I didn't want to know what would happen if I disturbed their silence.

I counted the specs of lint dotting the ceiling of the van.

In the back of my head, I played through scenarios that ranged from uncomfortable to nightmarish. Assuming that Brayden told his dad what he saw happen between me and Alina, I would be punished for my violation of the terms & conditions. There's still a chance The Council would go easy on me, maybe a week in The Outskirts on crew or some community service job. I haven't turned eighteen yet. My skin is tanned, but not too dark. I'm a conventionally pretty, young girl from the Inner Quarters. These are all things that should work in my favor.

If they decided to exile me, they'll be sure to offer me a role on *Escape the Outskirts*. I've watched so many episodes of it that I know I'll do good on the show. I'm a huge fan and pretty knowledgeable about the loopholes for different challenges. I'll be voted back home in no time.

My thoughts warred against each other. A spark of optimism, if I showed enough remorse maybe they wouldn't exile me at all, was dimmed by the pessimistic flood of images worse than exile. I felt my heart pound against my ribs with each thought. There was more than enough

panic flooding my veins to signal my *Lenses* awake, but the breathing box never appeared. I hoped that it was a trick of the van, but worried it was the banging of my head against the floor that broke my *Lenses*.

On the floor of the van, I felt my life in the Inner Quarters wash away. Life as I knew it would be erased.

Chapter 2

My back ached from the stiff floor of the van, as the drive stretched on for what felt like an eternity. I could barely see anything out of the window, only the tops of trees being exchanged for the sides of skyscrapers. My intestines twisted and gurgled whatever was left of dinner. I worried it was loud enough for The Enforcers to hear.

My body lurched forward with the van's abrupt stop. When I regained my bearings, the only thing I could see was concrete. It was always kind of jarring to cross into The District, all the green manicured lawns and colorful playgrounds exchanged for endless gray. Inside the concrete cave, the car shifted into park and I listened to the walls creak, gears turning.

The floor gave way beneath us. I was weightless for a moment, all my organs overcome with a falling sensation. We fell for a long time. It was too dark to see anything out of the windows, it felt like the van was too close to the walls on either side. Once my organs settled back into their normal place, the car shifted into reverse. It inched backwards, then shifted into drive, and inched forward. *What if I threw up back here?* This continued for a few endless minutes.

Once the car freed itself, unflattering yellow light trickled in the windows and lit spray-painted concrete pillars. While there were a lot of spray-painted symbols, none of them meant anything to me. Matter of fact, in all the times I've been to The District I've never seen a place that looked so filthy. I know I haven't been to The District many times in my life, but I feel like I would have noticed something so unkept.

Everything in The District is supposed to be extremely clean. Supposedly, it's the "safest" and "happiest" neighborhood in The Community. In my opinion, it has no personality, all of the

tech makes it feel sterile and hospital-like. Other Residents love that “The District supports the most hands-on technological integration” and “it's only a short walk to *Aura Technologies* Headquarters”. Supposedly it’s “cutting edge”, but I don’t even know what that’s supposed to mean. I can only tell the neighborhood has let itself go, allowing for all of this spray paint.

The van jerked again when it shifted gears. It reversed into an open parking spot. I was kind of grateful all of the looping further and further down stopped. As soon as the van shifted into park, The Enforcers jumped out of it. They yanked open the last set of doors, staring at me, but I was still a little too dizzy and nauseous (not that they cared).

They stood in front of the door, blocking my way out. I couldn’t help but think about how silly they looked, white uniforms looking piss yellow under the garage lights. I swallowed my chuckle, when I noticed the thick black batons hanging off their hips. They stood there for a few moments in utter silence, one at either door, staring at me or each other, I couldn’t tell with the helmets. I felt my face getting hot, like I was embarrassed to be seen by them.

Without warning, gloved hands hook under my armpits. The Enforcer dragged my limp body out of the van, leaving me with a subtle rug burn on my legs. Before I could find my balance on two feet, one of the Enforcers pulled my arms behind my back and cuffed them with wide, white, metallic *Aura Technologies* branded handcuffs. My wrists stung for a moment. It didn’t hurt very much. Most of the discomfort was from my shoulders straining, puffing my chest, since the cuffs were heavy and at an awkward angle.

The pain in my shoulders became irrelevant, when one of the Enforcers pressed a button and I lost my vision entirely. The whole garage faded to black. I blinked and blinked, still nothing. My chest tightened and my stomach flipped. I kept trying to rub my eyes, but my hands

were stuck. My skin was hot and my clothes were suddenly scratchy against my dimpled skin. I wondered if this was death, if the sting in my wrist was really a poison to kill me.

Someone tied something around my head, pulling out a few stray hairs, then the stench of alcohol overwhelmed me. My eyes prickled with tears. My nose burned so much, it started to run. I tasted the salty, watery substance on my lips. Every open pore on my face stung.

I felt two people stand on either side of me, each with a hand on my shoulder. They pressed me forward. The one on my left kept messing with my feet trying to trip me. Every step I took was unsteady, small. When the steps were too small or slow, someone's baton would press into the base of my spine. The pressure was too much.

We walked for a long time, before a rush of A/C went over my body. It wicked away some of the sweat on my face and body, but accentuated the smell of alcohol. I gagged. The hands and baton kept pushing me forward. I could hear nothing but our steps echoing. Nobody talked or breathed deeply. It felt like we were the only people in the building.

The smooth floor under my feet only made it easier to get tripped up by whoever was bumping my left foot. I kept almost tripping, struggling to walk through the darkness. The Enforcers kept pushing me forward.

We walked and walked. With nothing to see or hear, I felt time moving. I could sense myself aging. I focused on the rhythm of our steps to drown out the thoughts of actually aging, turning 18 on *Escape the Outskirts* and losing everything.

We stopped abruptly. Someone shoved me to the floor, my knees ringing on impact. The pain radiated down my shins. It wasn't enough. A large leather gloved hand pushed me down

further, until I felt the cool floor against my warm cheeks. My whole body was flat against the floor, arms tied behind my back, still blind.

My chest felt too tight. Panic tingled my skin and flipped my stomach. I tried to breathe, but my ribs had nowhere to go when they expanded with breath. I could feel them circling me, watching me, like I was entertainment. My cheeks flushed with anger, but I laid there frozen in fear. If I stepped out of line, I didn't know what they would do to me.

From the sounds of their boots, it sounded like three of them were in the room shuffling around my body. A chair screeched across the floor, sending a chill down my spine. I shuddered.

Two sets of boots squeaked close to me. Gloved hands were on my body again and every muscle in me clenched. One hand went under each armpit and I was half-dragged, half-carried into the chair. I couldn't sit right with the cuffs behind my back, but I did my best not to squirm. They were so close to me I could smell their breath.

A short musical tone played.

The cuffs loosened, but gloves were on each arm immediately. Someone else slid the cuffs off, they wore too much ocean-scented cologne. I was re-cuffed (hands on my lap this time) before I could roll out my wrists.

When they let go of me, the three sets of boots marched away.

A longer musical tone played.

My vision came back pixel by pixel. I let the slow wave of relief wash over me, before trying to understand where I was.

This was definitely not The Outskirts. I was in some sort of office. It felt incredibly set-up, like a model home. Everything was perfectly coordinated, either white or black. Sure, it was

all *nice* stuff. The desk was made of marble, the couch to my left was made of leather. But, none of it had any personality. There were no frames on the walls, colorful tech accessories, or even anything interesting on top of the desk. I had no clue what I was meant to do here, they left no instructions.

So, I sat patiently in silence. I tried to be the model Resident I knew I should be and ignore the rattling questions in my mind.

Whose office is this? What do they do? What do they want to do with me?

Where's Alina? Is she here, too? What's our plan for handling this?

The door swung open. I craned my neck to see who came inside. Not an Enforcer, not Alina, but someone dressed like a doctor. Her pale blonde hair was pulled back into a tight bun at the nape of her neck and her lab coat consumed her. It made her look so young, so small and frail. Honestly, it made me feel kind of better. I don't know why.

She smiled at me, making eye contact.

It was intentional.

Her Digital Footprint profile appeared right beside her. Good to know my *Lenses* are still working. Her entire online presence was just a swipe away. Her name, Dr. Elizabeth Fennyl, was bolded at the top of her screen. She's been working with *Aura Technologies* as a psychiatrist for the exiled for ten years. She listens to country music and likes taking her dog on walks through the neighborhood parks.

"Hi, Mila, do you feel like you have a better sense about me now?" Her voice was gentle and warm. Her hands fiddled with a white controller.

A shock went through my wrists and the Digital Footprint closed itself with a snapping sound.

I nodded, picking up the corners of my lips, politely.

“That’s great, I hope it made you more comfortable. For the duration of your time in exile, your *Lenses* will have modified capabilities, including limited Digital Footprint access. My profile might be the last one you see until you get back.” Her heels clacked behind each word, until she made it to sit across from me at her desk.

I leaned forward, cuffs digging into my belly. “So, I’ll have a chance to come back?”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, first I have to assess your fitness to go to The Outskirts.”

I jumped further forward at the thought of not having to go to The Outskirts at all, the cuffs were probably bruising my stomach. “Are you saying there’s a chance I won’t have to go at all?”

Dr.Fennyl let her eyes roam over me, narrowed and analytical. She looked me up, then down. Her fingers moved furiously in the air typing something I couldn’t see. Then, she paused. “Those cuffs are archaic, don’t you think?” She sprang up, twiddling with a key fob in her hand, and clacked her way right beside me. “May I?”

“Yes ma’am. Thank you.”

She slid the cuffs off my wrists. I rolled them over and over, enjoying the relief of pressure.

Back at her seat, she asked, “Does that feel better?”

“So much better, thank you so much.”

“Shall we get into it?”

I nodded, rubbing my wrists.

“I’m going to ask you some questions. First, it’s going to be basic information. Then, we’ll delve into your crime. After that, I’ll ask questions that are a little more personal. Does that make sense?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Confirm your first and last name and date of birth for me.” Though her voice remained gentle, it took on a robotic monotone quality as she rattled off the questions and typed my responses.

“Mila Sanchez, February 26th, 2060.”

“Your resident number.”

“891.”

“Thank you for that.” She looks over at me again. “So, do you know why you’re here?”

I shook my head no. Since nobody has told me anything specific, I imagined it to be a fair answer.

“Did the Enforcers explain why you were detained at the moment you were arrested.”

“No, ma’am.”

She typed on her *Lenses*, then sighed. “Do you have any idea of what code you may have violated?”

I shook my head no, again. That was a blatant lie. My stomach gurgled, as I replayed the feeling of Alina’s hands on my hips.

“So, you have no recollection of violating our Terms & Conditions?” Her eyes narrowed.

I picked at the skin around my nails and fumbled with sounds that didn't even sound close to any words in the dictionary.

"Don't be nervous, Mila. Just think about the last few days, have you partaken in any behaviors or activities that breach the community guidelines or terms." The warmth returned to her voice.

"I didn't do any of the big ones, like rob or hurt someone. I'm a good Resident." A burning ball of tears formed in my throat, choking my words.

Dr.Fennyl's long pale fingers stretched across the table, to hold my hand. "It's okay, Mila. Is there anything you think you might've done, no matter how small."

Alina's face flashed in my mind. She was probably just a few doors down, scared out of her mind and putting on a brave face. I knew I needed to say the right thing to protect her. I just had no clue what that right thing was. My brain was so loud that I couldn't say anything at all.

I didn't realize I was crying, until Dr.Fennyl handed me a tissue box. Then, I tasted all the saltiness. It made me want to throw up.

"Mila, I know this is hard, but Residents who willingly admit to their wrongdoings have the highest return rate. I want the best for you, so I want you to tell me why you think they arrested you." Her hands were warm, stroking my forearm on the table. It's the same thing Ma would do when I was little.

Silence stretched between us, as I considered what to say. I struggled for a while, until I decided to talk for the sake of it, just to buy some thinking time. "You know, they pulled me out of my bed and dragged me into my front yard where all my neighbors were watching. I've seen other people be arrested, but I didn't realize how aggressive it was."

“I’m sorry that happened to you.” She didn’t blink or type it anywhere. It didn’t seem like she was really sorry.

“I’ve had, like, the worst headache since then. It’s like everything is blurring together, so I don’t know what it could’ve been,” It wasn’t entirely a lie, but I needed more time to figure out what I was going to say about Alina. I couldn’t imagine what she was going through. I took in a sharp breath. “Well, but, I think there might be one thing.”

“Okay, what is it?”

“My friend and I went to this party over the weekend and got dared to kiss each other. Then, we were hanging out after school and I thought about wanting to try it again. I told her that, then it’s all blurry.” I could still taste Alina on my lips, but I thought a little plausible deniability wouldn’t hurt.

“So, you agree that it was your idea to kiss her after school?” Dr.Fennyl spoke casually.

I nod, my cheeks heated up.

Tsk. “Okay, Mila, we are going to move forward with charging you for a violation of Codes Eight and Twelve.”

“Code twelve?” My heart plummeted into my stomach, bile climbing up my throat.

“Yes, you were in violation of sexual coercion for forcing yourself onto Alina Bradshaw.”

“I don’t understand, what would be defined as coercion?” It felt like I was free falling.

Why would anyone think I forced myself onto her? She wanted me!

“The Enforcers interviewed the victim and she offered excruciating details of your assault, which were corroborated by a witness.” Dr.Fennyl rattled off the events like it was nothing to her, but the room went icy cold as she spoke.